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AUTHOR Harry, Beth
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ABSTRACT

This study examined attitudes among Puerto Rican-American parents toward the processes of assessment, placement and instruction of students with disabilities. Twelve such families in a low-income, mostly Hispanic urban community were interviewed and observed and ethnographic methods used to assess the role of their culture in parents' interpretations of their children's special education placement. Findings included: (1) significantly different cultural meanings were attached to classification terms (some carrying moral implications); (2) parents had their own theories explaning their children's difficulties; and (3) inadequate communication efforts by school administrators were compounded by language difficulties and a reliance on written communication between school and family. Includes 42 references. (PB)

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I Know What It Says, But I Don't Know What It Means:

An Ethnographic Study of The Views of Puerto Rican Parents

by

Beth Harry, Ph.D.
(formerly Teelucksingh)

Assistant Professor
University of Maryland

EC 232139

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I KNOW WHAT IT SAYS, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE VIEWS OF PUERTO RICAN PARENTS

In the face of the rapidly increasing cultural diversity of the U.S., the education system is faced with the challenge of different cultural understandings, assumptions and expectations. Current demographic projections for the coming century (Hodgkinson, 1985) underscore the urgency of finding radical solutions to the evident mismatch between school systems and many of those they serve.

The on-going debate over assessment and instruction of minority students (Duran, 1989; Figueroa, 1989; Messick, 1984; Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1986), reflects the fact that a definitive dividing line between special and regular education is an elusive concept. Thus, the arbitrariness of the designation "disability", for many students with mild learning disorders, illustrates the argument that disability is a socially constructed concept (Bogdan & Knoll, 1988). For many minority students, underachievement is the point at which regular and special education meet, with many students from what has been called "the mental withdrawal - grade retention - drop-out syndrome" (Stein, 1986), crossing the border from "normalcy" to "disability".

This paper is concerned with one group of parents' views of this process. The mandate for the participation of parents in the placement process should serve as a protection to students who might be inappropriately placed, and should provide assistance to

educators in the decision-making process. However, if culturally different parents hold radically different understandings of the meaning of special education placement, the intent of the law can be seriously undermined. This article will use the findings of an ethnographic study of Puerto Rican parents' views to demonstrate the impact of cross-cultural misunderstandings. It will also demonstrate a seeming paradox, that, cultural differences notwithstanding, such parents' explanations of their children's difficulties may closely parallel some of the major debates current in the field.

Hispanic Parents and Special Education

Limited documentation of Hispanic parents' views of the education system so far demonstrate that parents place great value on education and express faith in the schools, but that their knowledge of what actually goes on in schools is minimal (Condon, 1979; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987). Studies focusing on special education show a similar pattern (Figler, 1981; Lynch & Stein, 1987). For parents who are immigrants this pattern could be expected to be particularly marked.

While such parents may know little about the system in their host country, however, they do hold very specific assumptions and understandings of the meaning of education in their home countries. With regard to special education in particular, it is often the case that there is no such parallel in their home countries (Lynch & Stein, 1987) and that cultural meanings attached to concepts of disability may be very different

from in the U.S. (Condon, 1979; Figler, 1981; Correa, 1989). One challenge facing special educators, therefore, is to be sensitive to potential areas of cross-cultural meaning which could lead to misunderstanding and alienation. Only through knowledge of cultural differences can educators begin the arduous, but rewarding task of building bridges between home and school. Indeed, the most recent attention given to this topic calls for professionals to develop a "reciprocal" view of the acculturation process (Correa, 1989) and a "collaborative" approach to working with minority communities (Cummins, 1989).

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger data-set from an ethnographic study of low-income, Puerto Rican-American parents' views of special education. The primary aim of the study was to examine the role of culture in parents' interpretations of their children's special education placement. A secondary aim was to examine the extent and quality of the parents' interaction with the special education system, and those factors which facilitate or obstruct their participation.

Design of the Study

Participants

Participants were 12 Puerto Rican-American families residing in a low-income, largely Hispanic community, in a medium-sized city in the northeast. In 3 families, both fathers and mothers were participants, while in the other 9, only mothers and one grandmother participated. Spanish was the language of the homes,

and only one mother, who was born on the mainland, was a native speaker of English. The families had lived between 2 and 12 years on the mainland and 11 families were currently receiving welfare benefits. Since several families had more than one child in a special education program, the group represented a total of 17 children, or 35% of the 48 Puerto Rican students enrolled in special education programs in the school district, all but one of whom were classified as having mild disabilities. Of the 17 children in the study, 6 were classified as mentally retarded and 11 learning disabled.

The parents were contacted by two Hispanic social workers affiliated with a neighborhood voluntary agency. Selection of the families was based on personal judgements by the social workers as to which families they felt would be most accessible and most willing to participate. The researcher was introduced to the parents by the social workers, and subsequently proceeded independently of them.

Method

The study used ethnographic methods to investigate the role of culture in parents' interpretations of their children's special education placement. Information was collected by repeated unstructured interviews, conducted in the ethnographic tradition (Spradley, 1979; Bogdan & Biklen 1982), and through participant observation, conducted predominantly in the style of "observer as participant" (McCall & Simmons, 1969). From 2 to 6 interviews were held with each family, and were conducted in participants'

homes in Spanish or a mixture of Spanish and English, as appropriate. Observations included 7 meetings between parents and school personnel, as well as a variety of family and community activities over a period of 9 months. Interviews were also conducted with 12 district professionals involved in service-delivery or policy.

Findings

The data show 3 central themes regarding the issue of meaning for these families: First, different cultural meanings were attached to the classification of children as "handicapped" and reflected 3 dimensions: (a) the parameters of "normalcy" in terms of childrens' development were much wider than those used by the educational system; (b) different designations for disability led to parents' confusion of terms like "handicap" and "retarded" with more extreme forms of deviance; and (c) these designations sometimes carried particular moral meanings, notably the notion that characteristics ascribed to one family member may reflect on the character and health of the family as a whole.

Second, and no less important, was the fact that the parents held their own theories explaining their childrens' difficulties, and that these explanations were very much in line with current arguments in the field.

Third, communication difficulties inherent in the fact of cultural differences were exacerbated by the school district's reliance upon written communication and inadequate explanation of the meaning of information, procedures and events.

The Meaning of the Labels

Ramona, a woman of 55, had had years of experience with the special education system. Her daughter, Angelica, had been placed in a program for children labeled EMR, when she was between the ages of 8 and 13. At the time of the study she had returned to the regular stream, but Ramona's grandaughter, Rosita, was currently in special education, classified as "mildly mentally retarded".

The following is Ramona's account of her daughter's initial referral to special education. This story is representative of the way in which many families described the initial referral of a child for special education services. For many it was a moment of crisis, marking the onset of a period of confusion and distress.

Retarded, handicapped, or crazy.

> When the children were small I always used to go and collect them from school. One day, when my youngest daughter was in the second grade, I went to get her and as I was walking along Seymour Street the child came running toward me screaming. I was very frightened and thought that something terrible had happened. When she got close to me she grabbed me and threw herself on me and shrieked, "Mammi!" I said, "My God! What has happened to you?" And she said to me, "The teacher told me that I must not come to her class anymore, that she is not going to struggle with me anymore because I am crazy!"

6.

So I went to the school and I told them the child is not crazy but they started sending me these letters and I took them to the Latin American Association (LAA) and asked someone what they said and they told me it said the child is retarded. They put her in the special class although I told them at the meeting that no person who is retarded, who does not have a good mind, can do the hard school work she does. She does all the school work, but they send this letter just because the girl is slow.

When she got a bit older I went to the school and told them to stop sending these letters because the child sees them, she knows English and she reads them and she gets very upset and says, "I am not going back to the school unless they stop saying I am crazy because I am not crazy". I told them that they themselves are going to make something wrong with the girl's mind and they have given me a job to get this idea out of her mind.

She is not in the special class anymore, and sometimes she falls below the level, because she is in ninth grade, and sometimes the work is very hard, and she has to fall back, but she always tries and does the work...

Now they are saying the same thing about my grandaughter, but she has nothing wrong with her mind either. She behaves well and she speaks clearly in both Spanish and English. Why do they say she is retarded?...

They [Americans] say that the word "handicap" means a lot of things, it doesn't just mean that a person is

crazy. But for us, Puerto Ricans, we still understand this word as "crazy". For me, a person who is handicapped is a person who is not of sound mind or has problems in speech or some problem of the hands or legs. But my children have nothing like that, thanks to God and the Virgin! (Ramona)

Most parents were initially as incredulous as Ramona at the assignment of the label "mentally retarded". Coming from a background where daily affairs can be managed by a healthy body, common sense and elementary academic skills, parents explained that the label "retarded" or "handicapped" would be applied only to someone whose competence is severely impaired or who is considered mentally deranged. Thus, the labeling of Ramona's daughter and grandaughter seemed a contradiction in terms: how could a person who is retarded read and become incensed by the very letter that describes her as retarded? How could a six and a half year old who speaks both English and Spanish be retarded?

In addition to different parameters for normal development, the word "retardado" was tied to the general category of mental illness - a tremendously stigmatized form of social deviance. Thus the term would only used to denote behavior and a functional level seriously different from the norm. One mother, Dora, speaking in terms very similar to Ramona, made a clear distinction between "retarded" and "handicapped":

> For me, retarded is "crazy". For us, that's 'retardado". For me the word "handicap" means a person who is incapacitated, like mentally, or missing a leg, or who is blind or deaf, who cannot work and cannot do anything...a person who is invalid, useless...but for Americans, it is a different thing - for them, "handicap" is everybody! (Dora)

For parents to accept the use of the word "retarded" they must start by differentiating it from the word "loco". Most parents who made this transition substituted the word "slow". Inez, for example, had made an effort to understand the school's use of the label "retarded"; however, she differentiated this from a more extreme form of retardation, explaining that it really meant, "that my child learns slowly, but is not very retarded like some children who do not know what they are doing."

Accepting that the child is slow was not always easy, however, since parents would still need to see the child as significantly different from their own expectations. This became confusing for parents whose own level of education was at the third or fourth grade and who had a child already in the fifth or sixth, or who was bilingual while the parent found English very difficult to learn. One mother, Carmen, exclaimed angrily:

> I don't really know what her problem is because sometimes they give her papers with such hard work that neither her father nor I can do it. (Carmen)

Learning Disabled

The term "incapacitado para aprender", or "impedido en el aprendizaje" literally, "incapacitated or impaired in learning", did not evoke the same confusion for parents, since this term is usually explained to the parents in terms of the child being of "normal intelligence" but having trouble learning to read, write, or to speak clearly. The parents seemed to understand the term quite readily but most did not accept it as an appropriate description of their child. While all agreed that their children were having difficulty learning in school, only one parent interpreted the difficulty as a "disability". The following section will explain parents' theories of both categories.

Parents' Theories

Parent's interpretations of their children's difficulties varied in the specifics, but from all the interviews there emerged 3 distinct themes: the importance of family identity in the interpretation of a child's developmental patterns; the detrimental effects of second-language acquisition upon school learning; and the detrimental effects of educational practices such as frequent changes in placement, out-of-neighborhood placement, an unchallenging curriculum and inflexible reading instruction.

Family identity.

The strong familism of Hispanic cultures is well documented (Condon, 1981; Escobar, 1982). With reference to Puerto Rican people in particular, Canino (1980), has described the typical

family as tending to show an "enmeshed" rather than a "disengaged" structure. In this pattern, there is a strong emphasis on the family's identity as a group rather than as a collection of individuals, which, Canino says, may lead to features such as, "prolonged mother child interaction", overlapping of nuclear and extended family roles, and a perception of illness as a problem which resides within the family rather than solely within the individual.

This concept of the family became a crucial factor in some parents' interpretations of their children's being described as "handicapped". These parents said they felt that their families had been disgraced because the social histories written about the children gave the impression that the children's difficulties resulted from immorality in the family. In addition to these families' traditional association of "retardation" with mental illness, disability thus took on an extra stigma, that of being tied to bad family character.

Parents' comments also demonstrated, however, that, while a strong concept of group identity makes the whole group vulnerable, there is also a resilience created by these same assumptions. That is, inasmuch as the individual may bring shame to the group, so may aspects of the group's identity serve to protect the individual. Thus, all parents spoke of their childrens' strengths and weaknesses in terms of family characteristics.

There is a certain acceptability in a child's difficulties "coming from the father", or being "just like his aunt". While some mothers modified the term "retarded", and others rejected it outright, in either case they described the children in terms of

marked family traits not considered to be outside the range of normal behavior. Thus, they felt that the school's labeling process did not recognize the child's individuality and family identity. Ramona, for example, explained both her daughter's and her grandaughter's difficulties at school in terms of the school's preference for more expressive types of personality. Her children, she said, were very quiet, both by heredity and because of the family's life style:

> As I told them at the school, the only problem my child has is that she is very quiet. She does not talk much. But this quietness comes from the family because the father of these children is very silent. He - if you speak to him he speaks, if you greet him he greets you, if not, nothing! ...so this is by heredity, the child has no problem in speech nor is she retarded or anything.
> ... and my grandaughter - she is very timid, you know, I brought her up here and she does not play with other children outside, only at school. At home I only let her go outside if she goes with the family, but alone, no. (Ramona)

In a similar vein, another mother, Francisca , acknowledged that her 10-year-old daughter was progressing more slowly than most children in academic work, but did not agree that this meant she was mentally retarded. Rather, she described her daughter as very unsure of herself because of extreme shyness, similar to that of her "father's family" and of Francisca herself. Dora, whose 9-year-old, Conchita, was also classified as "mentally retarded",

agreed that her daughter needed a special class because she was slow in learning and her behavior was very irratic. Ana understood what "Americans" mean by "retarded" but considered it irrelevant: Conchita, she said, is simply "like her father". He never did learn to read and write and has a quick temper. He has always been like that and she feared that Conchita would be too:

> I think she won't change because she is the same thing as my husband. He is always "con coraje", (quick to anger). You tell him something, he talks to you back. He can't stay quiet. He spoils Conchita - he says, " I love her because she is just like me!" (Dora)

"Por el idioma / Because of the language".

Overlapping with explanations based on family identity was the common theme of "confusion" resulting from the change from Spanish to English. Parents of children labeled learning disabled, in particular, focused on this theory, while parents of children labeled mentally retarded tended to have broader explanations, which included language confusion and detrimental educational practices.

Since Spanish was the primary language in all of the homes in the study, even those children born in the U.S. learned Spanish as their first language. Thus, English became a requirement only upon entrance into school in the U.S., which, for most, was between kindergarten and the third grade. These children were placed directly into regular education English-speaking classes with varying amounts of "pull-out" for the "English as a Second

Language" (ESL) program. Those labeled mentally retarded were identified within a year or two and those labeled learning disabled were referred to special education between the second and sixth grades. All of the latter group had repeated one, in several cases, two grades before being referred.

Parents said that the children had been "doing fine" in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten and that their problems began when the child entered the elementary grades. Of those children who had started school in Puerto Rico, most of the parents said that the child had no problem in school there. Only two children, who had severe behavior problems, had been considered for special education placement in Puerto Rico.

Some parents interpreted the second-language difficulties in school as a reflection of American intolerance and unreasonable expectations on the part of teachers. Josefina, for example, whose 14-year-old son had been in a special education class since the fourth grade, said:

> It is all because of the language - nothing more! At first my son did not know English but he had to learn to read it and write it. Then when he learned it his pronunciation was not perfect like an American because he must have a Puerto Rican accent, but they wanted him to know it correctly. When I went to the meeting they said that the child is at a high level in math but the reading ... so I told them that I suppose that a child from Puerto Rico could not learn English so quickly - he can learn to read it but not so

perfectly as an American. (Josefina)

Another mother, Delia, illustrated the impact of this process by drawing a comparison between her older children, who began school in Puerto Rico and were doing "alright" until they entered the first and second grades in the U.S., and her youngest child, who was born in the U.S. and went to pre-kindergarten here. She said that at the end of the term there was a great family joke when the little girl came home from her kindergarten class with a certificate for good reading:

> The children all had to laugh, but, you know, they felt embarrassed because they are behind in reading. But it is because she started here in New York in the pre-k, not like them starting in Puerto Rico and then coming to this country to meet with a new language. (Delia)

While parents were adamant regarding the role of language confusion, it was evident that they did not have a clear idea of exactly how this worked in school. Parents used the terms "ESL" and "bilingual" interchangeably, and expressed the belief that this program was the source of the children's confusion. However, none of the children in the study were old enough to have been in the district's bilingual program, which had been discontinued about 8 years prior to this time. Thus, one important implication of parents' comments on language programs in the school, is the extent of their unawareness of the educational

program their children were in. This recalls similar observations made by Figler (1981) and Delgado-Gaitan (1987).

Another aspect of the comment that "bilingual or ESL" classes confuses children is that this belief presented a dilemma for most of the parents: they felt that a choice had to be made between English and Spanish, and all were adamant that they would choose English for their children. Yet they said that one disadvantage of being educated in English only was that the children never learn to read and write in Spanish, and might even forget the language after a while. For families who thought they might like to return to Puerto Rico, this was particularly worrying. Others simply felt that the ability to speak two languages would be an advantage for the children when they grow up.

Detrimental educational practices.

In addition to the explanation based on language confusion, some parents went further, placing blame on specific educational practices. Parents of children labeled mentally retarded had two common criticisms: first, that frequent changes of school had interfered with their children's progress, and second, that the curriculum in the "special class" was infantile and repetitive.

Between kindergarten and age 9, Inez's daughter, Rosemary, had been moved to 5 different schools and had finally been placed in a school where the district said she would remain until age 12. Inez liked this school, since Rosemary was finally beginning to show progress and had recently passed the kindergarten levels and begun first grade work.

By the age of 7, Ramona's granddaughter had been placed in 3 different schools. Ramona was angry about the moves and about the child being placed in a school outside of the neighborhood. She was also angry about the nature of the curriculum, which she said emphasized kindergarten activities such as painting and coloring:

> They give her a little paper with animals and she has to mark if it is a cow or a dog, and things like that! I see her as much more alert than that and she could learn to count and write... All day long she is wasting time, because they are not teaching her anything. If she needs to learn to paint I could teach her at home!
>
> (Ramona)

Dora expressed the same sentiments. She agreed with special class placement for her daughter because of the small groupings where she should get more attention. However, she said that 4 school changes in 3 years had done 9-year-old Conchita "a lot of harm" and had slowed down her progress. In addition, she said that for 3 years her special education program was more like kindergarten than first grade. Dora had encountered the same problem when her son had been placed in special education some years before in another city. Upon relocating, she found her own way of solving the problem:

> When I moved down here I was tired of Jose staying down in the special class. He was always in kindergarten, they never let him pass to the first grade because they say he doesn't

know the work. But how can Jose know something if you don't tell him how to do it? All they did was painting and some little stuff - every day the same thing. So when I came here I told them I lost the school papers and I put him in regular first grade. He failed one year but the next year he passed and he never failed since then and he gets A's and B's in the regular class because he is very intelligent. (Dora)

The teaching of reading became the focus of one mother's concern. Ana, whose daughter, Maria, was labeled learning disabled, was the only mother who had completed high school. At the time of the study, Ana was pursuing an understanding of the methodology used to teach reading, and had concluded that inflexible use of a direct-instruction, phonic method, along with repeated grade retention, had compounded her daughter's language-induced difficulties. Ana did not consider her daughter as learning disabled, because:

> ...when I started teaching her to read in Kindergarten, I taught her to read the whole word and she was learning, but the way they are teaching her now is confusing her. All children are not the same and she is not learning by this method. For one thing, it is only phonetics and she became confused when she started school and had to learn to do everything in English; so she does not understand the difference between the letters ABC, and the sounds you have to say in English. (Ana)

Both Ana's account and her daughter's school records showed that although Maria had passed the first reading level at the end of her the second grade, in repeating the grade she had, somehow, been put back to the same level. Towards the end of her repeating year, Maria's report indicated that she still had not mastered this reading level. Her mother was incredulous:

> It is a very hard thing to understand! It is impossible that Maria could stay a whole year on the same reading level, especially when she had passed it the year before! (Ana)

School-Home Communication

Against this background of mistrust and inadequate information, the only consistent form of communication from the school system for many years, was, in one mother's words - " un monton de papeles" - "a pile of papers" from the school (Carmen). Prior to the year of the study, letters had been sent in English, a practice to which all parents expressed resentment. The year of the study was one of transition, in which the school district was in the process of translating all documents into Spanish and also providing Spanish-speaking liaison personnel to bridge the communication gap. Yet a comment from one mother typified the response of many to these documents: " They sent me a letter - I know what it says, but I don't know what it means!" (Rita).

With documents coming in Spanish, there were still 3 pervasive problems: first was the level of readability of special education material, which, according to Roit (1984) is at an average of sixth grade reading; most of the mothers in the study

had left school between the fifth and ninth grades, while many fathers had left in the fourth grade or earlier. Second, the impact of letters from a relatively unknown power proved particularly intimidating and alientating for people whose culture requires "personalism" in interpersonal behavior (Fitzpatrick, 1987). Third, for parents who were operating from an inadequate information and experiential base regarding special education, it was practically impossible to interpret the formal and jargon-ridden documents of the school system. The IEP phase 1, for example, an important document which records all placement decisions, was a mystery to even the most informed and participatory parents, who did not know what to make of terms such as "Mainstreaming - as appropriate"; "placement - option 1"; "hours per day - 5"; or "diploma-bound".

The IEP phase 2, that part of the child's program where a parent should be most likely to have some input, was virtually unknown to most parents. As it turned out, the two most informed mothers in the group, Inez and Rita, did, in fact, have copies of this document among their papers, but did not know what they were. When I showed it to Inez, she told me that the teacher had gone through it with her, but, she exclaimed: "That is the IEP? I didn't know that was what you were talking about!" Rita, meanwhile, said that hers had come in the mail, was in English, and used phrases she could not understand, such as "cognitive functioning" and "phonic analysis".

It could be argued that, for these two mothers at least, the information was given, and their apparent lack of awareness of it was only at the level of language. That is, they knew about the

IEP, but simply did not know what to call it. However, the level of language is crucial, because it reflects meaning. For example, the meaning of essential concepts such as individualization and continuous assessment are reflected in terms firmly entrenched in the language of the field, such as "IEP" or "annual/triennial review" . The problems outlined above were not simply a matter of translation - of parents not knowing the English word for these activities: they did not know the Spanish name for them either. They did not know that they had a name at all. In other words, they did not realize that certain activities or events were established procedures, required by law, with a recognized name and a ritualized manner of implementation.

Thus, many parents found the school's communication meaningless, sometimes even threatening, in its formality and foreignness. The following comment from Carmen was representative of the resentment expressed by many parents:

> So many papers! I have a lot of work to do - in the mornings I do my work and then in the afternoon I take care of my mother and do her groceries and wash her clothes. I have a lot of boxes with a lot of papers and I told my husband I would throow them away and he said, "No, no!" So I took them to the agencey and gave them to them. I can't stand having so many papers! (Carmen)

The most common result of parents' unawareness of their rights and of the requirements and procedures of the system, was a sense of powerlessness, manifested by a pattern of resignation and

withdrawal - a kind of passive resistance expressed in the hope of demonstrating their disapproval. The view of parental participation as a meaningless ritual was typified by the following comment by Francisca:

> It is only their opinions that matter. If I do not want the child in a special class, or if I want her in a different school, they will still do what they want. Because that is what I tried to do, and the social worker helped me and we tried, but they did not listen to us. Our opinions are not valued...Many parents do not want their child in a special class or in a school so far away, but they keep quiet. It is very hard to struggle with these Americans...In America, the schools are for Americans. (Francisca)

Discussion

This study of parents' views makes three crucial points for professionals in special education: first, it illustrates the argument that conceptions of disability are socially constructed (Bogdan & Knoll, 1988), and that, in the words of Irving Goffman: "The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" (Goffman, 1963, p. 138). Second, the study shows a cluster of folk theories which are very much in line with certain current arguments in the field of special education. Third, it points to the tremendous responsibility facing professionals, to ensure that communication with culturally diverse families is

meaningful and constructive, rather than undermining and disempowering.

Disability and Cultural Perspectives

The perspectives of these 12 Puerto Rican families should sharpen educators' awareness of the potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding inherent in the culturally specific classification system used by special education. While parents placed great value on education and saw it as their children's route to success, they did not interpret academic success as an indicator of normalcy or good mental health. In their view, a child may be slower than others and may need extra help in learning to read and write but that does not make the child "disabled". Rather, it may indicate that a number of factors may have interfered with his or her progress, most often experiences outside of the child, either in the home or school environment and, in particular, the learning of the second language.

The notion of limitations stemming from within the child was accepted tentatively by only a few parents. Such parents spoke of their children's development or behavior in terms of a normal range of diversity which was part of the family's identity: it may be a child's nature to be slow in learning or to be extremely shy or quick tempered, but it is not necessarily a disability. Wolfensberger (1983) has described the process of stigmatizing in terms of the negative valuing of a characteristic, the subsequent attribution of that characteristic as the defining feature of an individual, and, hence, the ultimate devaluing of the whole

individual. Similarly, Goffman (1963) has spoken of this process as the "spoiling" or "disgracing" of individual identity. For these Puerto Rican families, a broad sense of family identity, with wide parameters of acceptable development and behavior, can protect the individual from such insult, while simultaneously rendering the whole family vulnerable if an individual's difficulties are so extreme as to be considered deviant.

Thus, this study shows how intense can be the stigmatizing effects on families whose cultural base is different, whose knowledge of the school system is minimal, and who already feel powerless and alienated. Correa (1989) has made the point that acculturation must be a two way process, with professionals in education becoming sensitized to the values and norms of the cultures from which their students come. Prior to this step, is the need for professionals to become aware of their own values, and of the fact that most human values are not universal but are generated by the needs of each culture. Such awareness is not too much to ask: it is through the eyes of the school that a child officially comes to be defined as a success or a failure; the school system must, therefore, accept the tremendous responsibility that accompanies such power.

Folk Theories and Professional Arguments

While the discussion above illustrates the role of culture in notions of disability, it is important to note that the views of these parents also reflect on-going debates current among professionals in the field, vis: debates on labeling, on

appropriate instruction for bilingual students, and on the efficacy of special class placement.

Labeling.

Arguments against the current classification system are no less than 20 years old (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973) and have continued to gain momentum (Gardner, 1982; Reynolds & Lakin, 1988) with regard to both the mild mental retardation construct and learning disabilities. One recommendation for change has been a call for new designations, such as "educational handicap" (Reschly, 1987), or "educationally delayed" (Polloway & Smith, 1987), reflecting the fact that student's difficulties are largely related to academic learning. Indeed, Reschly's argument that students classified as mildly retarded are "inappropriately stigmatized by implicit use of the same continuum for all levels of mental retardation" (Ibid, p. 37) is identical to that of the parents in this study.

More radical, however, are challenges which call for rejection of categorical eligibility criteria based on the concept of within-child deficits. Such arguments call for a system of service which would reflect the programmatic needs of students, or which rely on curriculum-based approaches and dimensional rather than categorical diagnosis (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; Reynolds & Lakin, 1987).

These arguments are even more urgent when applied to students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, where the assessment procedures used for classification are known to be inadequate and inappropriate (Figueroa, 1989; Cummins, 1980).

Particularly relevant to the views of parents in this study is the observation that the learning disability label is often applied to children whose difficulties are really a reflection of normal second language development (Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1986).

Instruction and efficacy.

Research on instruction also shows the impact of both bilingualism and biculturalism. Children may demonstrate adequate basic interpersonal competence (BICS) in a second language (L2), yet their level of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) may be inadequate to the task of literacy or psychological assessment in L2 (Cummins, 1979). The literature on this topic overwhelmingly concurs that to move children to second-language literacy too soon is to set them up for failure in both languages, thus preparing them for low-status roles in the host society, as well as alienation from their native culture (Cordasco, 1976; Cummins, 1986; Lewis, 1980; Ovando & Collier, 1985; Spener, 1988; Stein, 1986).

A crucial outcome of the premature introduction of children to L2 is grade retention, a feature frequently observed among bilingual students, with a common pattern of "overage" students (Walker, 1987). Among the families in this study it was not uncommon to find children as much as 3 years older than the usual age for their grade, and it was the rare child who had not repeated at least one grade level.

Besides language of instruction, research is increasingly focusing on the need for culturally sensitive instructional approaches. In contrast to the direct instruction, phonic-based

approach used with Ana'a daughter in this study, are more holistic, meaning-based approaches recommended currently for students from different cultures (Au, 1981, Ruiz, 1989). Indeed, Figueroa, Fradd & Correa (1989), in summarizing the findings to date on assessment and instructional services, call for a paradigm shift from "decontextualized, acultural and asocial" interventions, towards conditions of high context, both in assessment and instructional approaches. Along with this go recommendations for the targeting of curricula towards the "upper range of bilingual children's academic, linguistic, and social skills" (Ruiz, 1989, p. 130). Like the parents in this study, the field is calling for effective, challenging, and culturally appropriate special education programs.

The Role of Parents in Empowerment

In his proposed framework for the empowerment of minority students, Cummins (1989), uses a sociohistorical perspective to analyze the underachievement of students' from what John Ogbu (1978) has called caste-like minorities. Cummins argues that only through holistic interventions, incorporating cultural/linguistic, community, pedagogical and assessment needs, will minority students be empowered to achieve to their potential. The input of parents is essential in this process.

The Puerto Rican-American parents in this study occupy the status of a caste-like minority, being from a territory which has a history of political subordination to their host society, and, additionally, being people of color from low-income backgrounds.

Such parents have often been described as passive, trusting and satisfied with the school system. This study shows that an appearance of passivity or satisfaction may disguise parents' feelings of powerlessness and resignation; similarly, an appearance of trust may be no more than an ingrained, habitual deference to authority.

Regarding home-school communication, the data show clearly that for such families, home-school communication should be actively pursued in a personalized manner, by professionals who respect the culture of the families; that written communication should be in the language of the home, at the simplest and clearest level of expression; that written communication should be kept at a minimum, and replaced by verbal explanation, with genuine provision for discussion and disagreement, prior to any request for consent; and that when parents participate in a decision-making event, they should be given a full explanation of its name, meaning, and legal and practical importance.

Once parents have been adequately informed, it is equally important that professionals seek the views and guidance of parents regarding the meaning of students' low achievement, since these data show that parents' views on such matters may be very instructive. Indeed, most of the parents in this study said that their children were doing fine until they started school. This should not be relegated to the status of parent/folk lore: it is, increasingly, the comment of careful scholars who have focused their attention on students from low-status minority groups. Henry Trueba (1989) puts the case succinctly:

> These disabilities are an attribute of schools. Childrens' seeming "unpreparedness" for mainstream schooling is only a measure of the rigidity and ignorance of our school system, which creates handicap out of social and cultural differences (p. 70).

This study shows that the power of parents may be seriously undermined by culturally different understandings. It is not, however, enough to say that parents reject the label "retarded" because they think it means "crazy". Even when they know it does not, they do know that "retarded" is also a stigmatized term in this society, and feel that their children's differences are not sufficient to warrant the stigma of deviancy.

The study also shows that poor parents, with little formal education, and a different language and culture, may, through their own analysis of their children's difficulties, have a significant contribution to make to current debates in the field of special education. This can only underscore Cummins' (1989) call for a collaborative versus an exclusionary approach to defining the roles of teachers and families.

Above all, the most important lesson for professionals to learn, is to be ever suspicious of the statement that "these parents do not care about their children", or "these parents are not interested in what happens in the school". This study points to intense caring on the part of parents, but emphasizes that parents' participation and interaction with professionals may be deeply influenced by culturally based attitudes to authority, by inadequate knowledge and experience of the system in the host

country, and by a feeling of intimidation and powerlessness in the face of one of the most powerful and formalized institutions in the United States - the school.

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